DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 204 970 EC 133 541

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TITLE Assertiveness with 'Special' Children.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Convention of The Council for Exceptional Children (59th, New York, NY, April, 1981, Session H-7).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Assertiveness; *Disabilities; *Discipline; Parent Child Relationship; Parent Role; Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

The author examines issues related to adult assertiveness in controlling and setting limits for handicapped children. Reasons for adults not wishing to be in charge include feelings of guilt, lack of consistency in enforcing rules, and a sense of sympathy for special children. Assertiveness is distinguished from aggressiveness, and suggestions for assertive speaking such as making direct straightforward statements are given. The art of making assertive compromises is discussed, as is applying penalities. A chart categorizing nonverbal behaviors as nonassertive, aggressive, and assertive is included. (CL)

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ED204970

ASSERTIVENESS WITH 'SPECIAL' CHILDREN

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What do 'special' children need from adults? It is believed that there are two categories of need; two basic functions that adults provide for children. These are "caring" functions, things we do to provide nurturing support, and "executive" functions, things we do to structure and set limits and boundaries on a child's behavior. Children cannot do without either of these functions, but it seems that adults have been lax or ineffective about providing the "executive" functions.

Why? There are four major reasons that adults who are in contact with 'special' children do not set limits and therefore, give these children what is called negative power. That it, power that neither adult nor child really wants the child to have.

First, there is the sympathy factor. 'Special' children are "handicapped". They can't do certain things. We watch them struggle and grow frustrated and we feel sympathetic. When it comes time to make demands or to deny requests we don't want to add to the child's frustration, so we back away from our "executive" function. We do not set high standards or focus on the abilities of the 'special' child. Because we do not expect, we do not get - a self-fulfilling prophesy that gives the child negative power.

Second, we are faced with our feelings of guilt and our need to make atonement. Why should adults feel guilty? Society has set up many ideals of how adults should be in the relationship with children. We should always be rational, omnipotent, all-knowing, and perfect - and should not need any help or support to be this way. When an adult falls short of these goals, he feels guilty. Atonement is not to assume responsibility or take charge. After all, who are we to take charge if we are not perfect.

Third, we live with the American idea of the inherent goodness and rightness of "freedom". We do not want anyone to limit our freedom, so we become unwilling to limit a child's freedom. We react against the time when adults were authoritarian and schools were disciplinarian. We react with permissiveness and lack of structure. In doing so, we confuse what John Dewey called "internal" and "external" freedom. Internal freedom is freedom of thought and feelings. External freedom is the freedom to move one's body at will. We begin to treat external freedom as an end in itself - as if it were necessary for a child always to be able to go and do as he pleases. We do not realize that it is sometimes more helpful to the child to limit his external freedom, while always permitting internal freedom - even if that means he will express his dislike of our limitations.

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Fourth, adults may simply run out of energy to be persistent and consistent in setting limits and enforcing rules. 'Special' children are hard to work with and require hard work. Adults may just become tired.

In addition to the ways that adults give power, children are very resourceful in finding ways to take it. According to Dreikirs, Pepper and Arunwald, children have goals when they misbehave. These goals are to seek attention, to prove power, to seek revenge and to use actual or imagined deficiencies. With these behaviors the child sees himself as worthless, wants to hurt others as he feels hurt, or just want to be left alone.

As parents or professionals working with the 'special' child, it is important to be aware of the causes of misbehavior in order to decide what action to take to ease the situation. With this awareness, it is possible to set limits for children in ways that will not aggravate the situation but that will guide them and help them grow.

Attention getting is common in our culture because few opportunities are provided for handicapped people - especially handicapped children - to establish their social position through useful contributions. Seeing no chance for constructive contributions, the 'special' child seeks proof of acceptance through what he can get from others through gifts, affection or at least through attention. Even negative attention, such as humiliation, punishment or even a spanking, does not matter as long as he achieves this purpose.

As the attention getting increases, parents and teachers try to stop it by trying to control the child. Getting into a power struggle, "who is controlling whom", is a lost cause for the adult. The child will win out with the exception of a few short episodes where the adult succeeds in beating the child down. In getting involved in power struggles with children, especially those who have had it in large doses, we are teaching them that power is all that counts in life. Children have no sense of responsibility or moral obligation. They are very resourceful and know where our vulnerable spots are.

Once a power conflict ensues, the relationship between child and adult can only further deteriorate and the child may move to the next goal, revenge. For the child who feels utterly rejected, who has lost faith in society and himself, the pain is so great that he turns to revenge. He can be heard saying to himself "I'm gonna get even". His behavior reinforces his perception. He regards the situation a triumph when he is considered vicious. Now he feels triumphant.

Finally, when all else fails, the child's last resort is to become passive and deficient in order to get special services and attention. Convinced of being a failure, he doesn't try any more. He wants nothing

more than to be left alone. By avoiding participation and contribution, he thinks he can avoid more humiliating and embarrassing situations. There are no definitive stages in a child's taking power in these ways. He can and does use any and all in a variety of ways to manipulate adults and situations.

What, then, is the point of an adult overcoming both his own and a child's resistance and doing executive functions? What is the benefit to the 'special' child of the adult in his life taking charge? Executive functions provide structure, limits, boundaries, and order. All of life has limits and structure and it is unfair to pretend this isn't so. Life is structured by mores, customs, laws and natural phenomena, and it is the duty and responsibility of adults to teach children what the limits are, how they are applied and how to cope with them.

Adults must know and believe that 'special' children want structure and limits, even when they do not think they do. Inside, they know they do not have the wisdom or control to handle the world and it is frightening to think that they have to. Children feel safe and cared for when they see the adults in their lives taking control. Thus, in addition to teaching 'special' children how to cope with the world, "executive" functions really show caring and nurturing.

Being willing to be "in charge" does not mean being a dictator. Adults should be setting the boundaries, the limits. Often not always, but many times, there is room for choice within those limits. This might be a choice about when, how or where a child complies with an expectation. It may even mean the freedom to express dislike of the expectation, while he is still expected to comply.

In summary, we are saying adults and children are not equal. Adults have the responsibility to set limits, provide structure and do executive functions. Children need to learn self-control and responsibility. The world doesn't work if adults and children are equal. It is an adult's job to teach self-control and self-discipline in order to gradually bring the child to an adult level. How does an adult take charge and do executive functions? Through assertive adult relations with children. Assertiveness, as it will be spoken of here, is both a state of mind - in which the adult believes in his right and responsibility to have authority - and a way of behaving with children that can be learned. However, if adults do not believe in their right, all of the techniques in the world will not mean a thing.

Assertiveness may be differentiated from two other kinds of behavior adults often use in dealing with children - aggression and non-assertiveness. Non-assertiveness may be thought of as backing down, giving in, being inconsistent or refusing to set limits in the first place. It shows a lack of respect by the adult for his own needs and for the ability and strength of the child to learn. An aggressive adult takes charge, but does so in a manner that is intended to degrade, belittle and humiliate the child. This adult gets what he wants regardless of how he has to do it. The assertive adult is also in command, setting limits and

enforcing them. However, the style is different because the basic idea is respect for both adults and children. Once the adult believes that it is right to be in charge, and that he would rather do this through assertion than through aggression, there are some techniques which may be learned.

Assertive Speaking

There are basically four things to think about if an adult wants his words to be assertive. First, make a direct straightforward statement. Do not ask children rhetorical questions (Do you want to be quiet now?) unless prepared to accept "no" for an answer. This means that the adult must be sure about what he wants and ready, able and willing to state it. One way of doing this is with "I" statements: "I want you to..." or "I need you to...". This helps the child to understand that this adult is taking the responsibility. Another way is to make the statement an absolute" "The rule here is..." or "It's time to...". This is useful if you don't want even the appearance of a personal battle of wills.

Second, the statement should be clear, descriptive and specific rather than general and vague. The adult should explain just what he means by "be good", "clean up", or "be polite". For 'special' children the explanation must be slow, clear, and point at a time. The adult may even need to demonstrate or help the 'special' child the first few times.

The third way to speak assertively is to give reasons freely. This lets children know that we are not arbitrary; that we have thought about an issue and we are sure. It also conveys our respect - so important for 'special' children - and may make the child more willing just for that reason. However, the key is that we offer the reason once, and then we do not argue or defend it. The reason is volunteered as information, without an apology, as part and parcel of the clear direct statement. The child, ultimately, doesn't have to like our reason, he just has to do what has been asked.

Finally, the assertive adult shows interest in the 'special' child. The adult may or may not change his expectation after hearing the child's feelings, but if done sincerely, it certainly improves the relationship. The adult may check out how he thinks a child feels. ("You look ___, do you feel ___?); he may recognize and empathize with the child's expressed feelings even when he doesn't agree ("I guess I can understand why you might feel that way"); and/or he can acknowledge the validity of the child's point while still maintaining his position ("That's true, and I still want...").

However, merely because the adult has sounded like he means business, does not mean that the child will always comply. When he does not, the

adult must be consistent and persistent. Adults may find an assertion technique known as the "Broken Record" useful. The adult remains calm, does not get sidetracked into attitudes or emotional issues, and repeats what he wants. He should change the wording slightly, but not the gist of the message. He should repeat it, many times if necessary, until the child either obeys or the adult decides there is no other alternative to stronger action. There is usually no compromise possible.

When an adult who is attempting to speak assertively does not get compliance, there may be a good reason. This is because not only are our words important, but so is our non-verbal communication style. The expression "It's not what you say, but how you say it that counts" is a valuable adage. Mehrabian, a researcher in interpersonal communications, statistically shows the effectiveness of a given message as 7% what we say, 38% our tone and volume, and 55% the expression on our face. Because we are less aware of how we behave non-verbally, we are less able to bring these behaviors under conscious control. To become more aware it is helpful to know specifically what to look for. The non-verbal behavior chart included here identifies characteristics. This will help adults recognize some personal traits that are either aggressive or non-assertive. To be more effective in communicating with children, adults should attempt to use the assertive non-verbal behaviors.

However, even when an adult is an assertive authority, things do not always run smoothly. Sometimes, children persist in unacceptable behavior. The assertive adult then has two choices, compromise or penalize - either work out some middle position with a child or let him experience the unpleasant consequences of his actions. The choice between compromising and penalizing can be difficult. The adult should consider the 'special' child's physical and psychological readiness and ability to meet the demand. However, if the child is not ready, the adult does not drop the expectation completely. That is when compromise comes into the picture. The adult should also consider the time and energy demanded either to work out a compromise or to enforce a penalty. The energy which may seem considerable at the time, could be worth it in long term results. Finally, the adult must consider what learning he wants the child to get. Some issues really are non-negotiable and it benefits the child to learn that.

Compromising may sound like it is non-assertive rather than assertive. However, it is a natural part of life. No one, not even an adult, gets what he wants all the time. The assertive compromise is not done to appease a child, to win favor, or because the adult is weak. It is done when the adult decides it is in the best interest of both to seek a modification of the original position. The adult must stay in personal control and be very sure that he is willing to compromise and that he is willing to give. Some ways that an assertive adult might decide to compromise are:

- give a choice about how, when, or where an expectation is fulfilled.
- say no but provide an alternative.
- exchange one expectation for another.

-meet halfway if both are correct.
-ask child to suggest an alternative.
-brainstorm alternatives together.

Penalizing is also a natural part of life; when we break society's laws we pay a fine or go to jail. Imposing a penalty on a child is not done to seek retaliation, rather it is to teach something about rules and consequences. To penalize assertively, the adult must stay in control so that the penalty is immediate, yet impersonal and fitted to the severity of the "crime". The penalty must be thought out and logical, so it is most useful to plan penalties and explain them to children in advance of their use. There should be neither personal anger ("You are a rotten person") nor apology ("I'm sorry I have to do this"). Some assertive ways to penalize include:

- suffering the natural consequences when no physical danger is involved (a child who isn't home on time for a meal misses it).
- allowing the child to decide between obedience and the penalty.
- 'a time out' -
-allowing the child to suggest the penalty.
-physical force only when necessary to immediately stop a behavior.

There are many ways to both compromise and penalize. Adults should be creative and aware of many options. It is important to remember to use both compromise and penalties. We cannot compromise all the time or we will be seen as pushovers. If we penalize all the time, children become immune. (However, it is also crucial not to vacilate between them on a single issue. It is not helpful to negotiate about something one day and punish for it the next. It should also be pointed out that rewards are just as, if not more, important than compromises or penalties. In fact, a two to one ratio of rewards to penalties is recommended. This gives a child positive things to strive for and may lessen the need for the other.

When adults actively strive to be assertive with 'special' children, they teach them to cope with their world and thus make that place in the world more pleasant for adults and children alike.

NONVERBAL BEHAVIORS

	NonAssertive	Aggressive	Assertive
VOCAL	voice too soft frequent pauses filler words(ah,uh) questions	voice too loud fast speech jack hammer exclamatory sentences	moderate loudness even speed fluent declarative sentences
FACIAL	little eye contact tense facial muscles (fear) pleading timid look	glaring staring tense facial muscles (anger) impassive stony look	open direct eye contact relaxed facial muscles confident,engaged look
POSTURAL	fidget, ring hands hands behind back or in pockets nervous, shifting body stand at considerable distance	clenched fists finger pointing rigid body position standing very close	open hands hands at sides relaxed body position stand at a respectful distance
TOUCHING	not touching nervous touching feeling too timid to comfort/encourage through touch	grab to induce compliance poking to make points withholding comfort or encourage of touch	hold to calm or restrain touch to aid communication touch to comfort or encourage
SILENT	confusing pouting silent fear	silent treatment disapproving silent disinterest	calming silence accompanied by action silent encouragement

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